

# A NECESSARY PLEASURE

**Building a sense of agency through reading aloud**

By **Regie Routman**



**Regie Routman**

(regier@comcast.net), an ILA member since 1977, is an educator and author with more than 40 years of teaching and coaching experience. Her latest book is *Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success* (ASCD).

“Have I got a book for you!” Often, these are my first words upon meeting a new group of students and teachers. Gathering the students in front of me, I hold up an inspiring picture book and let them know why I brought it just for them.

Then, I begin to read.

The room goes silent as the language and illustrations work their magic. The children are quickly captivated, their eyes riveted on each page, heads leaning in to listen.



## REGIE'S BOOKLIST

Below is a list of Routman's favorite nonfiction picture books for reading aloud:

- *On a Beam of Light: A Story of Albert Einstein*. Jennifer Berne. 2013. Chronicle Books.
- *Nubs: The True Story of a Mutt, a Marine & a Miracle*. Brian Dennis, Kirby Larson, & Mary Nethery. 2009. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
- *Owen & Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship*. Craig Hatkoff, Isabella Hatkoff, & Paula Kahumbu. 2006. Scholastic.

- *Unlikely Friendships: 47 Remarkable Stories from the Animal Kingdom*. Jennifer S. Holland. 2011. Workman Publishing Co.
- *Two Bobbies: A True Story of Hurricane Katrina, Friendship, and Survival*. Kirby Larson & Mary Nethery. 2008. Bloomsbury USA Children's.
- *Ryan and Jimmy and the Well in Africa That Brought Them Together*. Herb Shoveller. 2008. Kids Can Press.
- *My Name is Blessing*. Eric Walters. III. Eugenie Fernandes. 2013. Tundra Books.

It is through fascinating stories and great books read aloud that I bond with students, an indispensable first step in reaching them and teaching them. Alice Ozma, in *The Reading Promise: My Father and the Books We Shared* (Grand Central Publishing), notes that "reading to someone is an act of love."

I cannot teach without great literature. My favorite and current work as an educator involves working in underperforming schools to show what's possible when expectations for all students are high, the work is authentic, and we begin with whole, literary texts.

These days, almost all the books I bring are nonfiction. This is a deliberate choice. It's not just that the latest standards require more nonfiction reading; it's mostly that the students I work with in weeklong residencies are routinely two years below grade level. They are often second language learners, students growing up in poverty, and students who struggle to become readers and writers.

Typically, these students have not heard many books read aloud at home, and too often school instruction has been an unhealthy diet of skills in isolation and part-to-whole teaching. They don't love reading or see the purpose of it. They don't believe they have agency in their complicated lives.

I want them to soar, to love learning, and to be imbued with an "I can do it!" spirit in all aspects of their lives. So I begin by reading aloud.

**Being read to puts us in a frame of mind for learning and increases literacy achievement.**

### The benefits abound

I read aloud not only to forge relationships with students, but also to ignite discussions, establish a community, inspire writing, and spark intellectual development. I deliberately choose challenging nonfiction books because students can understand books well above their reading level. In fact, teachers are often surprised at how long an engaging book will hold students' attention.

In a recent residency where I read to first graders *Nubs: The True Story of a Mutt, a Marine & a Miracle* (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers), teachers were flabbergasted that students, most of whom struggled with literacy, not only understood this complex story, but they enthusiastically listened to it in its entirety in one sitting.

Following the read-aloud and discussion, we did a shared summary writing with the purpose of posting it in the hallway to encourage others to read the book. The teacher later worked with

the whole class to turn that summary into a Readers' Theatre where groups of students each repeatedly read and practiced a couple of lines until they all read fluently. The end result was a two-minute, whole-class video, proudly performed by all the groups and then shared with the school.

### It isn't just for kids

Here's a well-kept secret: It's not just kids of all ages—including teenagers—who love to be read aloud to and benefit from it; teachers love it, too.

No matter how tight on time I am in facilitating a professional development meeting, I try to begin or end by reading aloud. It gets people settled and relaxed. It shows us why reading matters.

Being read to puts us in a frame of mind for learning and increases literacy achievement. Mem Fox, in her article "What Next in the Read-Aloud Battle? Win or Lose?" from *The Reading Teacher*, says children of any age who have routinely heard books read aloud score higher on national and state literacy tests. These students are not just more proficient readers, but are also excellent writers with wide vocabularies. Literacy informs and inspires their daily living.

It's not easy to be a teacher these days. The demands and pressures are unrelenting. Reading aloud is a salve on our open wounds; it heals, soothes, and comforts—and does so without much effort. ■